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Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language,
Online ISSN 2348-3083, SJ IMPACT FACTOR 2025: 8.326,
https://www.srjis.com/issues_data/269
PEER REVIEWED, REFEREED & INDEXED JOURNAL, AUG-SEPT 2025, VOL-13/71
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17590487

RESOLVING CONFLICT THROUGH NON-VIOLENCE: THE GANDHIAN MODEL

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Paper Received On: 21 August 2025

Peer Reviewed On: 25 September 2025

Published On: 01 October 2025

Abstract

Resolving conflict through non-violence, as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi, represents a transformative approach to human interactions and societal disputes. The Gandhian model emphasizes ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (truth-force) as central principles, advocating that enduring resolution arises not from coercion or aggression but from moral persuasion, empathy, and dialogue. Gandhi's method involves understanding the underlying causes of conflict, fostering mutual respect, and promoting reconciliation through ethical conduct and self-discipline. This approach is multi-dimensional, encompassing personal, social, and political spheres, and highlights the importance of spiritual integrity, non-retaliation, and constructive engagement. By prioritizing moral authority over physical power, the Gandhian model offers a sustainable framework for addressing interpersonal disputes, community tensions, and even international conflicts. The study of this model provides insights into how ethical leadership and non-violent strategies can contribute to lasting peace in a world increasingly beset by violence and mistrust.

Keywords: *Conflict, Non-violence, Violence, Resolution, Satyagraha.*

Conflict is an unavoidable part of human existence. It can be seen in almost every society, even in those regarded as peaceful. As societies grow and develop, life becomes more dynamic and complex, and human relationships also become increasingly complicated. This complexity raises the likelihood of conflicts, frictions, and contradictions. Whenever people live together, differences among them naturally give rise to conflicts. Because of human beings' aggressive tendencies, these conflicts can often turn violent and worsen living conditions. Therefore, our ability to live peacefully depends on how effectively we manage, handle, and resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

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Conflict is not only inevitable but also plays a vital role in social life. Dialectical thinkers view conflict as a process where opposing forces or ideas interact, leading to new patterns of relationships and adjustments that help sustain life despite internal disagreements. In everyday use, the word "conflict" carries many meanings. Broadly, it can refer to disagreements, arguments, disputes, or efforts to block others from achieving their goals. According to Roderick Ogley conflict is defined as "incompatibility in the aim, goals or interests of two or more individuals, groups or other units"[1]. Other scholars describe it as a state of mutual antagonism or hostility between two or more parties.

Although conflicts have existed throughout history, attempts to resolve them also have a long-standing tradition. In the Mahabharata, Shri Krishna's speeches—particularly in the Bhagavad Gita—as well as Kautilya's writings, discuss ethics and strategies for resolving conflicts. Similarly, political thinkers like Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Ibn Khaldun explored ways to manage conflicts within society. Spiritual leaders, rishis, and prophets have sought to address inner and personal conflicts to attain spiritual liberation (moksha). In an article published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (1965/4), Johan Galtung traces how institutionalized conflict resolution gradually developed since the Middle Ages, using methods such as prophecies, trials by ordeal, regulated warfare, private duels, and arbitration.

Modern theories of conflict can be linked to the works of Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, while thinkers like Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Adam Smith contributed significantly to Western traditions of conflict analysis. Different disciplines have approached conflict from various angles: psychologists examine internal conflicts, social psychologists study interpersonal and group conflicts, economists look at competition, labour disputes, and trade conflicts, and political scientists focus on political and international issues.

Human history is filled with examples of conflicts—most notably wars—between groups and nations. The two World Wars of the 20th century demonstrate this clearly. World War I (1914–1919) resulted in the deaths of over ten million people and left about twenty-two and a half million seriously wounded. Likewise, World War II (1939–1945) caused around fifty million deaths and about thirty-five million serious injuries or disabilities. Many of the countries involved took a decade or more to recover and begin developing again. Having witnessed the devastation and endless cycle of violence, nations longed for peace. In pursuit

[1] Ogley, Roderick, "Conflict Theory", edi. by Lester Kurtz, *Encyclopedia of violence, peace and conflict vol.1*, Elsevier Science, United States, 1999, p – 402.

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of this goal, the League of Nations was established after World War I to promote peaceful means of conflict resolution.

The theories of conflict resolution developed in the last decade of the 20th century marked a radical change in understanding the path to lasting peace. New knowledge about the root causes of conflict has led to a better understanding of the nature and complexity of today's conflicts. New ways of thinking about conflict require new techniques to address structural violence in war-torn countries. The conflict resolution approach has also brought the individual back into the realm of international peace building activities.

The field of conflict resolution is distinctive to peace research. In the late 1950s, it emerged as a distinct field within social science. Kenneth Boulding coined the term "conflict resolution" to refer to the study of conflict resolution[2]. When peace and harmony are disrupted, conflict resolution serves to restore them. In today's world, where socio-economic and technological imbalances have severely affected peace, it becomes essential to study conflict—its causes and possible solutions—so that the damage can be reversed or at least reduced.

Conflict resolution involves guiding opposing parties to a stage where they no longer feel driven to fight and can accept the distribution of benefits within the system. Since conflicts arise in various forms throughout human relationships and social life—and because all social systems are inherently imperfect—a systematic, scientific approach is crucial. Addressing conflicts superficially or ignoring their root causes can create even more complex problems in the future. The use of force in resolving conflicts is highly risky, as those who suffer losses in violent settlements often harbor resentment and seek revenge later. Any settlement achieved at the cost of one party's well-being cannot remain stable for long.

Mahatma Gandhi viewed conflict as a necessary means for asserting and discovering truth. Because absolute truth is beyond human reach, the journey toward it is continuous. At every stage of development, differing perceptions of truth naturally create "dialectical" conflicts. The uniqueness and strength of Gandhi's method lie in its commitment to nonviolence. He believed violence is the root cause of conflict, and using it only worsens disputes, making them dysfunctional or unjust. History may be filled with violent events, but Gandhi's approach removes violence entirely, ensuring that conflicts can be addressed peacefully. Nonviolent resistance (satyagraha) keeps the conflict active yet constructive. When one side chooses nonviolence, it opens the path for transformation in the other side. Violence becomes

[2] Richmond, Oliver P., *Maintaining order, Making Peace*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002, p – 77.

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ineffective when it fails to provoke a violent reaction from nonviolent people, eventually forcing the aggressor to abandon violence and adopt peaceful methods—of which the satyagrahi becomes the guiding force.

Nonviolence is the only alternative that can eliminate its terrible potential for harm and present us with great possibilities for good. Olivier Lacombe, the French philosopher, writes with conviction that only the power of the soul, the power of love, a kind of satyagraha on a global scale can ensure that the beneficial potential of the age Nuclear power will prevail over its threats.[3] Bertrand Russell, in his book *Common Sense and Nuclear War*, says that he believes that the arms race between great powers teach us that only nonviolent methods of dispute resolution will help humanity survive.[4]

Conflicts are not always resolved through violence; in many cases, peaceful methods have proven effective. A well-known instance comes from India, Gandhi's birthplace, where disputes with Bangladesh arose over sharing the waters of the Ganges River. Since the river flows largely through India before reaching the ocean via Bangladesh, tensions grew after India built the Farakka Dam in the 1970s, which deeply troubled Bangladesh. Yet, through sustained dialogue and negotiations, both countries managed to identify the core issues, recognize each other's challenges, and arrive at a cooperative agreement. Because India did not face significant losses in this process, the resolution turned into a mutually advantageous outcome. This example illustrates Gandhian ideals in practice and shows their relevance to broader conflicts.

Evidence suggests that Gandhian approaches are effective not only in domestic but also in international disputes. Among the greatest dangers humanity faces today are the arms trade and the spread of nuclear weapons. Gandhi envisioned a system of nonviolent global governance rooted in disarmament. Globally, the shift from hostility to negotiation between East and West demonstrates this possibility. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany after decades of separation serve as powerful symbols of reconciliation. With the arms race proving unsustainable, significant progress has been made in disarmament and arms control. The United Nations' recognition of October 2 as the International Day of Nonviolence highlights the worldwide acceptance of Gandhian philosophy. In the modern world, nonviolence stands out as the only sustainable route to enduring peace.

[3] Lacombe, Olivier, *Gandhi; ou, La force de l'ame,* Plon, 1964.
[4] Russell, Bertrand, *Common Sense and Nuclear War,* Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2013.

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From a philosophical standpoint, Gandhi can be regarded as a realist whose thought resonates with the dialectical perspectives of Hegel and Marx. While dialectics often justify conflict as a legitimate tool—for instance, employing coercion in the defence of property rights—and functionalism highlights consensus, Gandhi's views are more aligned with functionalism. Like Marx, he envisioned a classless society concerned with the welfare of all. Yet, unlike Marx, who emphasized the abolition of capitalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and dialectical materialism as the basis of socialism, Gandhi stressed nonviolence and moral reform as the true path to social harmony.

In this context, I will explore several theoretical approaches to conflict that respond to the broader field of conflict management. This examination will show that Gandhi's approach to resolving disputes stands out as one of the most effective. What unites these theories is their aim to transform conflict into a constructive, nonviolent process of social change rather than to suppress or eliminate it altogether. They rest on the assumption that conflict must be resolved rather than merely managed, an assumption rooted in their analysis of the deeper social, psychological, and structural causes of conflict.

Lewis Coser, in *The Functions of Social Conflict*, defines social conflict as a struggle over values, status, power, and resources, aimed at neutralizing or eliminating rivals. His conflict functionalism views conflict as a normal and necessary part of social life, with positive functions such as promoting social change, stimulating innovation, and fostering solidarity. Conflict can challenge norms, drive progress, and encourage personal growth by prompting critical reflection on beliefs and goals. Even negatively perceived conflicts reveal the need for structural reforms. While conflict can be destructive, effective management can turn it into a force for development. Coser identifies causes such as competition for resources, value differences, power imbalances, cultural variations, and psychological factors, emphasizing careful and sensitive conflict resolution.

John Galtung developed a revolutionary model of conflict for his time based on peace research theory. By coining the term "structural violence", he was the first to assert that violence was not only direct but could also originate from the underlying structures of society. Galtung argues that if injustice and oppression are deeply embedded in the foundations of a society, it will sooner or later lead to structural violence, where individuals or groups are deprived of access to resources.

John Galtung's conflict model depicts conflict as a triangle with three interlinked elements: contradictions (incompatible goals and interests), attitudes (perceptions, emotions, and

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misunderstandings), and behaviours (ranging from cooperation to coercion or violence). Complete conflict requires all three. In structurally unequal societies, these contradictions are rooted in deep power imbalances. Galtung sees conflict as a dynamic process where structures, attitudes, and behaviours influence each other.

He distinguishes between negative peace (absence of direct violence but presence of structural violence) and positive peace (human security and full development of potential). His concept of structural violence—systemic inequalities that harm individuals—has become a cornerstone of peace studies and influenced scholars like John Burton, promoting interdisciplinary, multilevel approaches to conflict resolution.

John Burton rejected the idea that conflict outcomes are determined by power, arguing instead that conflicts stem from the denial of basic human needs—particularly identity, security, and distributive justice. His human needs theory (later general conflict theory) treats conflict as a socio-biological issue, with third parties facilitating conditions for parties to identify and define their disputes. Burton's problem-solving approach emphasizes creative, cooperative solutions and restructuring problems to create space for resolution. He also stressed that lasting peace requires the consent of individual citizens, influencing modern peace operations. Critics, however, argue his approach is too universalistic, lacks empirical methods to verify human needs, and that his "workshop" method has limited applicability.

Edward A. Azar's concept of protracted social conflict rejects the strict division between internal and external conflict, focusing on visible, long-lasting disputes often fueled by ethnic and communal divisions. Such conflicts stem from the persistent denial of basic human needs, especially under conditions of repression and underdevelopment. Azar equates development with peace, stressing the need for responsive social institutions to address structural causes and reduce external pressures. His multidimensional approach, blending realist, structuralist, and pluralist perspectives, anticipates elements of Lederach's broader conflict resolution framework.

John Paul Lederach's comprehensive approach to conflict resolution integrates short-term efforts to end violence with long-term strategies for sustainable peace. Central to his approach is building peace infrastructure that actively involves all affected populations, ensuring broad participation in creating lasting and peaceful relations.

In Lederach's work, a society affected by conflict is depicted as a pyramid, topped by military and political leaders. Leaders in the middle in sectors such as healthcare, education and those in high positions in the military, who "hold the potential for helping to establish a relationship

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and skill-based infrastructure for sustaining the peace building process"[5]. Finally, at the local level, there are most stakeholder groups: civilians, refugees and displaced people, religious groups, local leaders, etc. For successful and sustainable conflict resolution, coordinated peace building strategies must be implemented at all three levels of society. Furthermore, different types of actors must be adapted to different methods of peace building.[6]

For all these reasons, any attempt to Conflict resolution must have a multi-dimensional approach to resolve conflicts at the attitudinal level, behavioral level and situational level, as well as all the factors responsible for creating conflict situations. Gandhi proposed a so-called multi-dimensional approach that includes 1) direct action aimed at resolving conflict at the behavioral and attitudinal level, and 2) constructive programs aimed at resolving conflict at the situational level. In the context of social conflict, Gandhi proposed a two-level approach to resolution. The first level deals with the immediate issue of the conflict: the actions and behavior of the other side.

A conflict situation often demands more than simple negotiation and persuasion, particularly when it arises from structural violence. According to Johan Galtung, "structural violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. It is not personal, and it is not easily visible, but it is as damaging as personal violence. Structural violence creates deep-rooted incompatibilities that are not easily resolved without addressing the underlying social and systemic inequalities"[7]. Gandhi proposed constructive programmes as a remedy. In a conflict situation, the function of a constructive programme is called "constructive dissolution" because it aims to resolve the factors causing the incompatibility/conflict. Constructive dissolution is a method of overcoming any underlying frustrations that are directly or indirectly causing the conflict. This method claims to resolve the frustrations that facilitate conflict. By resolving the situation, i.e. the conflict situation, it makes the conflict non-existent.

In diverse societies marked by wide socio-economic and cultural differences, people often face multiple forms of incompatibility. For instance, Indian village communities struggle with issues such as discrimination, high unemployment, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, illiteracy, poor sanitation, and unhygienic living conditions. Each of these problems individually creates tension, but together they generate a state of persistent conflict. Such

[5] Lederach, J. P., *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, Skyhorse Publishing Inc., 2014.
[6] ibid.
[7]Galtung, Johan, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167-191 .

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conditions often give rise to repeated communal clashes and riots. Addressing and removing these sources of frustration can help reduce communal violence, which is the goal of constructive dissolution.

Gandhi emphasized this idea of unity through his efforts to eradicate untouchability, improve labor-capital relations, promote workers' welfare, advocate for trusteeship, and encourage agricultural reforms. To confront human weaknesses and manage conflicts, he suggested a spiritual alternative to coercion. His approach favored persuasion, education, tolerance, and love as means of resolving disputes, rather than relying on violence or repression.

The idea of constructive dissolution views the opponent not as an enemy but as a "erring brother," someone who may be trapped within an unjust system. Such a person does not deserve punishment but rather understanding and support. Their hostility may be shaped by pressures from family or business circles, ignorance of human rights and equality, poor living conditions, low social status, limited opportunities for growth, or even physical and dietary factors. In this sense, the exploiter is also a victim of the very system that compels him to exploit, and he needs assistance to free himself from it.

In examining India's struggle against imperialism, Gandhi proposed eighteen constructive programmes designed to address the key factors that generate conflict. Depending on the nature of the conflict, different programmes could be applied as necessary. For the satyagrahi, engaging in these constructive programmes is not separate from the struggle but an essential part of it. They represent the pursuit of truth, a means of resisting falsehood and violence, and a constructive path toward genuine resolution.

Gandhi's multi-dimensional approach to conflict resolution further demonstrates its effectiveness. He emphasized personal purity in thought, speech, and action, aiming to make people spiritually oriented and devoted to serving God through service to humanity. Jawaharlal once observed that "He has instilled courage and manhood into the people of India, and disciplined endurance and the power of joyful discipline for a cause, and with all his humility and pride."[8] His simple way of living and deep moral convictions inspired millions, leaving a permanent mark on their hearts. Gandhi valued the "beauty of voluntary poverty,"[9] believing in simple living and high thinking. In this sense, he was a revolutionary who sought to transform human nature itself.

[8] Nehru, Jawaharlal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, Signet Press, Calcutta, 1949.

[9] Gandhi, Mahatma, Voluntary Poverty: From a Talk by Gandhi at the Guildhouse, London, England, on September 23, 1931, Poor Farm Press, United States, 1953.

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The ultimate aim of Gandhi's efforts was to secure peace for all humankind. For him, peace meant harmony, universal brotherhood, love, compassion, equality, and the fostering of healthy relations at both the international and personal levels. True peace was not limited to family life but extended to the community, the nation, and the entire world. He considered world peace essential for human progress. To achieve it, Gandhi insisted that nonviolence is indispensable, as only through nonviolent means can peace, solidarity, and universal brotherhood be established.

Cite Your Article as
Sanchita Chakraborty. (2025). RESOLVING CONFLICT THROUGH NON-VIOLENCE: THE GANDHIAN MODEL. Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language, 13(71), 65–73. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17590487

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